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Op-Ed: Rethinking the American Way of War and the Role of Landpower

September 10, 2012 | Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria, II

Tagged in: Op-Ed

Understanding the American way of war has never been easy. The distinguished historian Russell Weigley took more than 500 pages to come to terms with it in his classic, *The American Way of War* (1973). Even so, there was much he left out, as well as much he got wrong. For one thing, the actual origins of the American way of war were never adequately explored. Nor were America's so-called "small" wars, not just the ones that typically come to mind — such as the Barbary wars, the campaigns against Native Americans, the Banana wars, and the Border wars with Mexico; but also the less well-known ones — such as the many anti-piracy actions in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, and the late-19th and early 20th-century interventions in South America, the Pacific islands, China, and Russia. In fact, reputable sources show that there have been well over 200 such uses of U.S. troops since the late 18th century, most of which Weigley either barely mentioned or omitted altogether.^[1] To this number, we must add some three dozen covert operations undertaken during and after the Cold War, as well as more than 150 domestic military operations short of war.

Of course, not all of these actions escalated to bloodshed; and some of them, especially humanitarian relief operations, would not qualify as examples of the "use of force to compel an opponent to do our will" — the core of Carl von Clausewitz's definition of war. Yet, each of them was the result of a conscious decision by the U.S. Government to extend its policy "by other means" — an equally indispensable part of Clausewitz's definition. We are justified, therefore, in taking all of them into account. Doing so, in fact, not only broadens our understanding of the American way of war, it also reveals how that way of war has tended to use Landpower.

It shows us, for instance, that American military strategy since the Civil War has *not* been, as Weigley claimed, almost exclusively focused on the use of overwhelming force to achieve an opponent's annihilation. Instead, from the late-19th century Indian campaigns to today's operations, American political leaders have generally opted to employ only as much force as necessary, or no more than was politically and economically prudent. Obviously, what constitutes sufficient force is a subjective call, one that is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, not the least of which are what needs to be done, to whom, how badly, how soon — and at what level of risk. When that call is wrong, America's leaders are left with only two options: escalate or exit. Each has obvious consequences. Put simply, a failed or failing operation quickly becomes a political liability. This was as true for Lincoln's administration as it was for that of George W. Bush. It is the mind of the commander in chief — where gains and losses are weighed — that has always been America's center of gravity, not the will of the public.

Some will want to argue that Landpower's *raison d'être* is to defeat an opponent's ground forces. However, if more than 2 centuries of military operations are any guide, America's political leaders will see that as only "mission *half* accomplished." The Indian wars, the Philippine insurrection, the Banana wars, World Wars I and II, the interventions in Asia and Latin America, the Balkans, the Middle East, and many other areas suggest that Landpower is generally employed not only to defeat an opponent's ground forces, and the quicker the better, but also to establish and maintain control over people and places thereafter. This is what Landpower brings to the table that Airpower and Seapower cannot. The idea is, again, to extend the reach of policy.

The point is that rethinking the American way of war can help Landpower advocates make their case better. Doing so would show, among other things, that virtually every war the United States has been involved in, from the War of Independence to the current conflicts, has been complex, asymmetric, and hybrid. The hard truth, however, is that these adjectives do not help us either in preparing for the next round of conflicts, or in convincing anyone that Landpower is the right tool for the job when conflict does come. Admittedly, these terms were introduced, in part, to show that Landpower is an essential component of contemporary war, and that Airpower and Seapower, even in combination, are not adequate for today's complex contingencies. Still, these descriptors have long been double-edged swords, made sharper in recent years due to service downsizing. Using them suggests a dearth of historical mindedness, and a lack of professional expertise. They make contemporary wars seem too complex and too fraught with friction to engage in, especially with ground forces. Complexity and friction are part and parcel of everyday life. Treating them as something exceptional makes them larger than life, and calls into question our professional ability

to get the job done, despite their presence. Twenty-two years into the new security environment, Landpower professionals should have mastered the character of contemporary conflict by now. It is no more “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous” (VUCA) than the era of the Cold War, or any other era. The history of the American way of war tells us so.

As service roles and missions are reviewed and debated in the days ahead, Landpower advocates should seek to influence that debate in a manner that inspires confidence about the outcomes ground forces can deliver, rather than in ways that accentuate their potential liabilities. Otherwise, they may succeed in inspiring America's political leaders to be so prudent as to take Landpower off the table well before the next war comes.

Endnote

1. For the latest, see Richard F. Grimmett, “Instances of the Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2009,” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 27, 2010.

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